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SHAKESPEARE AND  
RABBINIC THOUGHT

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# Shakespeare and Rabbinic Thought

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## SERMON

Delivered at the

BAYSWATER SYNAGOGUE, LONDON, W.,

*On Sabbath, April 29th, 1916,*

BY

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M.A., D.LIT.

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## Shakespeare and Rabbinic Thought.

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SOME fifty years ago a highly interesting and fascinating work appeared in London by Bishop Wordsworth, entitled "Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible."

The dedication of that work is peculiarly telling, in view of the commemoration of the Tercentenary of the death of the great Master-mind to whom the world is doing homage during these days. The learned author dedicated his work "to his children: in the hope and with the aim that they may grow up readers and lovers of Shakespeare as the book of man; but still more, readers and lovers of the Bible as the Word of God."

As part of the commemoration in honour of the memory of the great genius of Stratford-on-Avon, April 30th has been fixed as "Shakespeare Sunday"; and Services will accordingly be held to-morrow in places of worship of all denominations. At the Afternoon Service in the historic Abbey at Westminster, the Shakespeare Sermon will be preached by the Sub-Dean, the Bishop, whose eloquent and burning words on behalf of our oppressed brethren, uttered in the great Guildhall in 1890, we still gladly call to mind with undiminished gratitude.

Surely, dear friends, we as Jews cannot do less than allow the memory of Shakespeare to enter somewhat into our Religious Service on this Sabbath Day, and thus to take some small part in the present commemoration; more especially, as it comes as an agreeable relief and peaceful diversion from the contemplation of so much strife and restlessness, wickedness and horror, with which our minds have become familiar, often sickened, during almost two years past.

I therefore purpose to bring before you to-day our great author—England's pride—not as a poet, not as a dramatist, not as a chronicler or historian, but as a man in the highest sense of the word, as a teacher of ethics, as a moral philosopher.

How far the greatest genius of modern times was indebted to Holy Scripture, and how far he has drawn from this inexhaustible source, has as yet been scarcely appreciated by the ordinary man and woman of the world. Not the least of the merits of Shakespeare in his plays is his reverence for the Bible, of which he must have been a constant and diligent reader. It has been computed that "there are above five hundred passages in his works which are taken apparently from Scripture, being either verbally or substantially founded on quotations from Holy Writ"; and there are about four hundred sentences besides these expressive of sentiments taken from the same source. He must indeed have drawn deeply from that inspired, undefiled well—the Book of the Bible.

As I do not wish to travel over the same ground which others have trod, or to repeat statements which I myself uttered some forty years ago in a youthful essay on the subject, I intend to dwell briefly upon a new and kindred theme, namely, *Shakespeare and Rabbinic thought*.



I will give you a few typical examples (for the theme cannot be exhausted within the limits of a single discourse), to show that not only did Shakespeare draw largely from the Book of the Bible, but that Rabbinic parallels may easily be discerned in the reading of Shakespeare's works.

We know in how marvellous a manner Shakespeare employed the rare gift of his genius in utilising and improving upon his original sources ; how some ancient chronicle formed the framework of his vivid historical plays ; how he pieced together and created (for *creation* was his great power) out of scanty scraps of material, legendary or romantic, some of the finest work. It is, therefore, not at all surprising if we find Shakespeare imbued, not only with the *spirit* of the Rabbis—for this would be due to the influence of the Bible itself, but with the very expression and phraseology of Rabbinic thought, which from various founts must have flowed by various meanderings into general literature. Besides, the human side of life, its observation and delineation, is a feature common both to the Rabbis of old and to the Shakespeare of Elizabethan England ; and it is this expression of the human side which forms the natural connecting link between them.

The passage in "As You Like It" (II. 7), in which "the world" is described by Shakespeare as "a stage," beginning "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players,—his acts being seven ages," is no doubt known to all. But it may not be so well known, that similar sentiments were expressed by our Rabbis in the *Midrash (Kohleth)* more than a thousand years before:   
 שבעה הבלים שאמר קהלת : כנגד שבעה עולמות שאדם רואה בן שנה.....הכל מחבקין ומנשקין אותה בן שתים ושלש דומה להזיר...בן עשר שנה קופיז

כגד' בן עשרים כסוס נהים משפר גרמיה ובעי אתתא.....הומין  
הרי הוא כקוף וג' :

"The repetition of the term 'vanity' seven times in the opening words of Ecclesiastes correspond to the seven worlds or ages through which man passes : at a year old, he is fondled and kissed by all ; at two or three he resembles the unclean animal ; at ten he skips about like a goat ; at twenty he puffs like a prancing horse ; he becomes a well-groomed lover, . . . and so onward, till in old age he becomes as the ape."

The *dignity of man*, on which the Psalmist dwells so rapturously in the words "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels," reproduced in the words of Hamlet (II. 2) :

"What a piece of work is man ! . . . how infinite in faculty ! . . .

In action, how like an angel ! In apprehension, how like a God !"

this is illustrated in the Talmud (*T. Hagiga*, 12a) אדם הראשון  
מן הארץ עד לרקיע היה.....וכיון שסרת הניה המב' ירו  
עליו ומיעטו :

"The first man reached from earth to heaven . . . but after his sin, the Almighty degraded man, and he was reduced to a lower degree."

Thus we are warned of the inevitable tendency which the commission of one wrong act has to beget another.

"One sin I know another doth provoke ;

Murder's as near to lust as flame to smoke:"

in the words of our Sages (*Ethics of the Fathers*, IV. 2) :  
עברה גוררת עברה :

"Sin leads on to sin," or "one sin drags after it a second sin" ; for do we not know from experience (in the words of the Rabbis) הרגל נעשה טבע "Custom becomes second nature" ; or, in Shakespeare's words, "Use almost can change the stamp of nature" (*Hamlet*, III. 4) ; "How use doth breed a habit in a man" (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, V. 4) ?

How well for the world if mortal would realise the truth, and emulate the example afforded in the prayerful wish of Beruria, wife of Rabbi Meir, who, when her husband called out for the punishment and destruction of the "sinner," checked him with this remark:—"When the Psalmist spake יתמו הטאים מן הארץ, he used the word הטאים which may equally be rendered 'sin,' חטאים כתיב ולא חוטאים

'May *sin*, I say, perish from the earth, and not *the sinner*!'

Have we not an echo of this sentiment in the words of Isabella to Angelo in "Measure for Measure" (II. 2)?

"I have a brother is condemned to die,  
I do beseech you, let it be his fault  
And not my brother,"

and Angelo replies:

"Condemn the fault, and not the actor of it."

Speaking of "Measure for Measure," we are reminded of the Rabbinic dictum regarding God's over-ruling providence and His justice in punishing מדה כנגד מדה "measure for measure" (*T. Nedarim*, 32a); or again, במדה שאדם מודד בו מודדין לו "With the measure that man measures out, he will be measured" (*T. Sotah*, 8b).

And is not this the idea expressed by Edgar in "King Lear" (V. 3)?

"The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to scourge us."

From the disease we naturally pass to the remedy. "Man is born unto trouble," but our Heavenly Judge is at the same time a merciful Father, and we have been led to believe that in

our own hands lies the power to make amends for our sinful actions ; and this is brought about by means of repentance, which is three-fold in character, according to the Jewish doctrine laid down by our Rabbis. There must be first יירוי "confession of sin," then חרטה "conviction and inward regret," and lastly עזיבה "abandonment of the sin."

And how does Shakespeare express this triple form of repentance in "Hamlet" (III. 4) ?

" Confess yourself to Heaven,  
Repent what's past, avoid what is to come."

Nay, further he asks :

" May one be pardoned and retain the offence ?"—the very idea metaphorically expressed by our Sages, when they say, that the cleansing of a person for the ritual purposes of ablution is of no avail in the case of one who is טובל ושרין בידו " taking the ablution with the object of defilement clinging to his hand " (Cf. *T. Taanith*, 16a).

In this connection we are easily reminded of the three expressions in our Liturgy for the New Year and Day of Atonement :

ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזירה :

" If anything is able to avert the evil decree, it is Repentance, Prayer, and Practical Virtue."

Prayer—the golden link that binds man to his Maker !

" My ending is despair :  
Unless I be relieved by Prayer,  
Which pierces so, that it assaults  
Mercy itself, and frees all faults."

(*Tempest*, Epilogue.)

But prayer has to be real, proceeding from the innermost recesses of the soul, not mere lip-service :—

**תפלה בלא כונה כגוף בלא נשמה :**

“ Prayer without devotion is as a body without a soul,”

say our Sages. And Shakespeare re-echoes :

“ My words fly up, my thoughts remain below,  
Words without thoughts never to Heaven go.”

(*Hamlet*, III. 3.)

And especially after a day's toil, when we are about to recruit our tired frame with Nature's sweet restorer, Sleep, how deep should be our faith and prayer, as we resign ourselves entirely into His hands !

“ To Thee I do commend my watchful soul,  
'Ere I let fall the windows of mine eyes ;  
Sleeping and waking, O defend me still !”

(*Richard III.*, V. 3.)

—almost the very words of the well-known hymn of our Daily Prayer-book :—

**בִּידְךָ אֶפְקֵד רוּחִי בַּעַת אִישׁן וְאֶעִירָה :**

“ Into Thy hand I commend my spirit, at the time when I sleep and when I awake.”

Nay, further, our ultimate fate is in the hands of Providence :

“ There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
Rough-hew them how we will.”

(*Hamlet*, V. 4.)

And thus exclaims the Sage of the Talmud : **אִין אָדָם נוֹקֵף : אֶצְבָּעוֹ מִלְמַטָּה אֵ"ב מִכַּרְיוֹן עָלָיו מִלְמַעְלָה :**

“ Man hurts not his finger here below, if it be not destined from above ” (*Hulin*, 7b).

It behoves us, therefore, "to praise our Creator"—the Eternal Disposer of life—at every turn, "at every breath we draw," to use the words of our Sages: **על כל נשימה ונשימה שאדם נושם צריך לקלם לבוראו (ב'ר פ'ד) :**

"Let never day nor night unhallowed pass,  
But still remember what the Lord hath done."

(2 Henry VI., II. 1.)

Indeed, "at every breath we draw," for we know not the term of life.

"Repent one day before thy death," says the Rabbi of old ;

**שוב יום אחד לפני מתתך שאלו תלמידיו את ר' אליעזר וכי אדם יודע איזהו יום ימות אמר להן וכל שכן ישוב היום שמא ימות למחר :**

"Rabbi Eliezer was thereupon asked by his disciples : Does then man know which day he will die ? And he replied : How imperative, therefore, it is upon man to repent day by day, lest he die on the morrow " (*T. Sabbath*, 153a).

Is not this the exclamation of King Lear (I. 4) ?

"Woe that too late repents !"

And what marvellous power there is in Repentance ! What are the concluding words in the famous speech of the troubled King in "Hamlet" :

"Try what repentance can : What can it not " ?

And do not our Sages remark : **מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין :**

"In the place in which the penitent stand, there even the perfectly righteous are unable to stand " (*T. Berachoth*, 34b).

At a time like the present, when many a household is, alas, bereft by the cruel War of their nearest and dearest, and the heart of man would almost break at the dispensation of Heaven, the immortal bard speaks even to such by the mouth of the Marquis of Dorset endeavouring to console his mother :

“ Comfort, dear mother ; God is much displeased  
That you take with unthankfulness His doing :  
In common worldly things ’tis called—ungrateful,  
With dull unwillingness to repay a debt,  
Which with a bounteous hand was kindly lent ;  
Much more to be thus opposite with Heaven,  
For it requires the royal debt it lent you.”

*(Richard III., II. 2.)*

Human nature and human experience were not very different in Talmudic times, and the heart of man had to be comforted in similar terms in similar circumstances ; for when the good wife of the Rabbi, a great teacher in Israel, trembling as to how she should break the news of the death of their two sons to the father, greeted him with a question, which carried with it its own reply, she anticipated the poet by some fifteen centuries. “ A few days ago a person entrusted some jewels to my custody, and now he asks them back again : should I restore them ? ” “ What ! Wouldst thou hesitate or be reluctant to restore to every one his own ? ” replied the Rabbi. Having explained her meaning to her husband, and he lamenting loudly the loss of his sons, she said : “ Rabbi, didst thou not teach me that we are not to be reluctant to restore that which was entrusted to our keeping ? See, the Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord ! ” and the Rabbi re-echoed, “ Blessed be the name of the Lord ! ”

Nor was this a unique example in those days. Another Rabbi, Akiba by name, amid his unfortunate experiences, was

in the habit of exclaiming, at every untoward incident in life, **גם זו לטובה**, which might well be paraphrased in Shakespeare's words :—

“ The will of Heaven  
Be done in this and all things ! ”

(*Henry VIII.*, I. 1.)

Man, to the end as well as through the whole of life, has to rely upon the mercy of Heaven ; and this thought should impel him to be kind and considerate to his fellow-creature.

“ We do pray for mercy,  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
The deeds of mercy.”

(*Merchant of Venice*, IV. 1.)

Have not our Rabbis of old taught **על הבריות כל המרחם**  
**מרחמים עליו מן השמים :**

“ The mercy we show unto others, Heaven will show unto us ” ?  
(*T. Sabbath*, 151b).

In truth the only safe refuge in life is in a perfect trust in Heaven. We are warned in the Bible : “ Put not your trust in princes, nor in any child of man ” ; and our Rabbis counsel

**יהי רצון שתהא מורא שמים עליכם כמורא בשר ודם :**

“ Would that the fear of Heaven were as strong within you as the fear of flesh and blood ! ” (*T. Berachoth*, 28b.)

Is not this the spirit breathed in the words of Wolsey's celebrated soliloquy :—

“ Had I but served my God with half the zeal  
I served my King, he would not in mine age  
Have left me naked to mine enemies ” ?

(*Henry VIII.*, III. 2.)



And as for Mercy itself, upon which the world may be said to be founded :—

“ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath :

. . . . .

It is an attribute to God Himself,  
And earthly power does then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice.”

(*Merchant of Venice*, IV. 1.)

The words of the poet carry us back to the Rabbinic interpretation of the words of the 4th verse of the Second Chapter of Genesis, “ the day when the *Lord God* made the earth and the heavens.” The double expression “ Lord God ” (*Adonai Elohim* in the original) points to the two attributes of God as the foundation upon which the world could only have stood firm :—**מדת הרחמים ומדת הדין** “ the quality of mercy and the quality of justice ”; in other words, **שתף הקב"ה** “ by the blending of these two attributes were heaven and earth made.”

I would further remind you in this connection of that touching Talmudic allegory which I have cited at length on former occasions, in which it is related that when the Almighty, about to create man, called together before his Throne a council of the angelic hosts, the Angels of Justice, Peace, and Truth all opposed his creation, until Mercy, the dearest child of the Eternal Father, stepped forward and spake : “ O Father, Create him, I pray ! Create him after Thine own image, as the favoured child of Thy goodness. . . . I will touch his heart with pity, and make him kind to others weaker than himself. . . . The father of the World listened to her voice, and with the aid of Mercy created man.”

For though the world may at times be steeped in sin, and it may repent the Creator that he had created man, yet the merit and blessing of one individual in an age may be sufficient to justify, if it were needed, the formation of man, and to turn the scale in favour of humanity. תפלתם של צדיקים מהפכת מדותיו של הקב"ה ממדת רגונות למדת רחמנות (יבמות סד' א) :

"How far that little candle throws his beams!  
So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

(*Merchant of Venice*, V. 1.)

So sings the immortal bard. And the simile will in no wise suffer, if we read for "deed" the word "life"; and realise that as "that little candle throws his beams afar, so does a good life shine in a wicked world."

And so say our Sages in the oldest *Midrash* on the Book of Numbers and Deuteronomy—the *Sifre*, commenting on the words ואצלת מן הרוח "I will take of the spirit which is upon thee, and will put it upon them" (*Numb.*, xi. 17).

Say they—

רמה משה דומה באותה שעה לנר שמונה על גבי מנורה ודלקו ממנו נרות הרבה ולא חסר אורו כלום. כך לא היתה חכמתו של משה חסרה כלום :

"In that hour Moses might be compared to a light placed upon a candlestick, from which many a light may be fed, whilst his own light—his knowledge and wisdom—will suffer no diminution."

And may it not be said with equal truth of the great dramatist and moralist of the Elizabethan age, that the light of his knowledge and wisdom has not diminished by reason of the

three hundred years that have passed since the day of his death? Nay, indeed, it has gained in illuminating power and brilliancy, having shed its beams in the interim, not alone throughout the length and breadth of these isles, but throughout the countries of the world, even to most distant parts.

“ Our myriad-minded Shakespeare,” as he has been termed ; “ he was not of an age, but for all time ”—“ a man, take him for all in all, we shall not look upon his like again.”

He was the “ soul,” the “ applause,” the “ delight,” the “ wonder ” of his own age : the glory of his spirit and genius abideth with us still.

Let us endeavour to profit by his teachings, so like the teachings of our Sages of old ; and may we renew our tribute of gratitude both to their memory and to his, on this the Tercentenary of his passing !



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